

The Interstate 93 Tri-Town Interchange Development Area (formerly known as the Lowell Junction Area)

Background

The Interstate 93 Tri-Town Interchange Development Area represents one of the largest concentrations of employment in Northeastern Massachusetts. Situated between Exit 41 (Route 125) and Exit 42 (Dascomb Road), achieving an interchange in this location has the potential of opening up hundreds of acres of currently landlocked and underutilized land as well as allowing for expansion of existing industries in an area which is constrained by poor access to the interstate.

Over the past twenty years, Andover and Wilmington have been unsuccessful in their attempts to improve access to Route 93 in the Lowell Junction area to service facilities currently occupied by Gillette/Proctor & Gamble, Wyeth BioPharma, Charles River Labs, AGFA Films and other existing businesses employing approximately 6,000 workers, while also opening up opportunities for development and redevelopment of new parcels in close proximity to the highway and commuter rail line. The failure to obtain such approval has impeded the expansion of those users, most notably Wyeth BioPharma, and the development of landlocked parcels in Tewksbury and Wilmington.

With the proposal of a regional shopping center in Tewksbury on the west side of Route 93, and recognizing the potential economic development benefits that may result from a new interchange in this development area, the three communities, Andover, Tewksbury and Wilmington, agreed to pursue the approval, design and construction of a new full-service interchange between Exits 41 & 42.

In 2001-2003 the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission (MVPC), with funding from MassHighway and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), undertook an "Interstate 93 Corridor Study", which examined the feasibility of widening of I-93, providing improvements to the interchanges along the I-93 corridor and adding a new interchange between Exit 41 (Route 125) and Exit 42 (Dascomb Road).

Where the Corridor Study focused on the engineering feasibility of providing an interchange between Exits 41 and 42 and had concluded it was feasible, MassHighway and FHWA recommended that further analysis of an interchange be investigated. Rather than include these additional interchange analyses as part of the I-93 Corridor Traffic Study, MassHighway and FHWA requested a stand-alone document evaluating alternatives for a new interchange. In response to MassHighway and FHWA, MVPC prepared a scope of services to conduct an interchange justification study and to prepare an Interchange Justification Report (IJR). In short, the scope of the IJR included an analysis of up to ten roadway concepts, traffic volumes, traffic operations, construction cost estimates, environmental impacts, and safety issues along the mainline (I-93), and addressed how each interchange alternative would satisfy the eight requirements established by the FHWA for a break in access.

The IJR was undertaken by the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission in collaboration with the Towns of Andover, Tewksbury and Wilmington. The IJR was intended to

provide a preliminary evaluation of the transportation, environmental and other impacts that would arise from the construction of the interchange. It marked the first step in the process of receiving Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) approval of a new interchange at this location.

Since that time, MassHighway and FHWA have continued to work towards developing a design for the interchange that can meet the needs of the Towns and meet the requirements of state and federal highway agencies. While this refinement process is making progress, there has been a significant need for creating a unified vision for land use around the interchange to ensure that the new infrastructure supports a high-quality development pattern without unnecessary sprawl.

1.2 Land Use Planning in the Tri-Town Interchange Development Area

In 2006 the communities of Andover, Wilmington and Tewksbury formed the Tri Town Development Task Force in an attempt to create a Unified Development Vision to guide the development of an estimated 700 acres of available land in the area in a highly coordinated manner consistent with the State's Sustainable Development Principles. Cooperative regional planning is not a task taken lightly by the three communities, represented by three regional planning authorities (MVPC, NMCOG and MAPC), and three separate MPOs. The task force retained the services of The Cecil Group to assist the three communities in developing four alternative visions for the Junction Area.

As a result of this public planning process, a consensus mixed-use vision emerged. The vision would allow for expansion of the broad science and technology based industrial district around sustainable mixed use "villages" offering a compact setting for office and retail uses, with residential uses included in locations where consensus support has been or can be developed to support the inclusion of residences in the mix.

The Tri-Town Unified Development Vision seeks to enable area businesses, residents, the towns, and the region to obtain significant new job and tax benefits, while mitigating existing neighborhood traffic congestion, limiting the impact of new vehicular trips, and improving environmental conditions. The Unified Development Vision is presently being refined by the task force, with the three towns committed to reaching an agreement on a mutually supported master plan that would respect each community's "Priorities" as outlined in the vision. Further refinement and consensus will be required to move the Development Vision into a plan that can be used as the basis for a form-based code.

While this development vision was moving forward in the Spring of 2008, Town Meeting voters in the three communities voted to designate three separate Priority Development Sites under the Commonwealth of Massachusetts "43D" expedited permitting regulation. This process requires the communities to commit to providing full permitting for development sites within 180 days. In exchange, the Commonwealth provides planning grants and economic development assistance for these sites. The three communities are now working to advance the planning that would allow the Mixed-Use Land Vision for the Development Area to move forward. The Towns have decided to pursue a form-based code as a method of expediting permitting and encoding the refined version of the development vision.

The Sustainability Challenge

The Unified Development Vision for the project area is as follows:

To facilitate the development of these 700 land-locked acres into a sustainable mixed-use corridor that supports smart-growth centers that will enable businesses, residents and the towns to receive significant benefit while mitigating current constraints.

In order to achieve the development vision, the land use regulations in the project area must be updated before the arrival of the new transportation infrastructure. Without such a regulatory change, the transportation infrastructure runs the risk of supporting a development format that is inconsistent with the vision, and while some goals of economic development and/or access may be achieved, the project area would not be able to achieve its full potential of supporting a sustainable maximized economic growth, while simultaneously protecting environmental resources and addressing project site constraints.

Form-Based Code Project Overview

Using the lessons learned from land use regulations promoted by the non-profit Form-Based Codes Institute, the development area stakeholders have concluded that the area would benefit from a form-based code as a method to ensure that the project area achieves the smart-growth goals that were outlined in the development vision. Without the opportunity to develop in a method that would allow for more effective implementation of the plan, the area risks being developed without the benefit of the planning vision from the communities.